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# THE TOCSIN OF REVOLT

BY PROFESSOR BRANDER MATTHEWS

## I

WHEN a man finds himself at last slowly climbing the slopes that lead to the lonely peak of three-score-and-ten he is likely to discover that his views and his aspirations are not in accord with those held by men still living leisurely in the foothills of youth. He sees that things are no longer what they were half a century earlier and that they are not now tending in the direction to which they then pointed. If he is wise, he warns himself against the danger of becoming a mere praiser of past times; and if he is very wise he makes every effort to understand and to appreciate the present and not to dread the future. He may even wonder whether he is not suffering from a premature hardening of the arteries of sympathy.

He cannot but be aware that his case presents no novelty, since no generation can ever understand and appreciate the generation which preceded it or that which follows it. It may sympathize with the former a little better than with the latter, because we can know our parents more intimately than we can ever know our children after they have once attained to man's estate. Moreover, time has already chosen and consecrated the chief figures of the generation which preceded ours and the effulgence of these outstanding personalities casts into the shade the failures of their time, whereas in the generation which follows ours the leaders have not been elected and the standard bearers have not yet been able to manifest themselves fully and to separate themselves from the failures, the freaks and the fakes who are as frequent and as insistently visible in one epoch as in another.

The sexagenarian also perceives that the very young who are vociferous in indiscriminate laudation of their contemporaries are not at all anxious that he should understand them and appreciate their aspirations. They do not greatly care for his sympathy—or rather they care not at all. In the inelastic intolerance and in the self-sufficient complacency of youth they refuse to waste their attention on him. They have no use for him, as they would phrase it; they dismiss him as a back-number, than which there can be no object more despicable in their eyes. If they deemed it to be worth while they might even cry out, "Go up, thou baldhead!" and they would utter this insult without any fear of an ursine retort.

They are self-centered and impatient of control. They are inclined to boast themselves as the foes of tradition and as the enemies of convention. They claim a large freedom for themselves; and, like the Puritans of old, they are prone to deny a like freedom to others. Their opinions may be half-baked but their prejudices are case-hardened. They see no reason to suspect that there may be interstices in their omniscience. They are assured by their juvenile energy that they "know it all"; and they are not yet old enough to have found out that the man who "knows it all" does not know much—does not indeed know himself, which is the beginning of knowledge. In their callow immaturity they would only sniff contemptuously if they happened to hear

the oft-quoted saying of the Master of Trinity, that "we are none of us infallible—not even the youngest of us."

They may dispute among themselves incessantly and violently and bitterly; but they present a united front in opposition to their elders and betters, their pastors and masters. And their elders, if they have acquired a little of the wisdom which is the privilege of age, must recognize that this is natural enough, in fact, inevitable, since it is what the elders did themselves when they had the fleeting joy of being young and of feeling the consciousness of their own untested powers. It is only by action and by reaction that the world moves. Every generation is entitled to prove all things, even if it is also bound to hold fast to that which is good. Every generation transmits to its successor the heterogeneity of traditions and of conventions which it found useful and which it therefore esteems precious.

Some of these are as valuable as those who established them believe; but others will not withstand the acid test on the touchstone of time. Oncoming youth must be free to select the traditions which are truly precious, the conventions which need to be preserved; and it is free also to make traditions of its own and to set up conventions more in accord with its own conditions. Without conventions of some sort the work of the world cannot be done, as youth always finds out sooner or later, when it seeks to abolish those which it has taken over. There is veracity as well as piquancy in the statement of a forgotten biographer that his hero "renounced the errors of the Church of Rome and adopted those of the Church of England."

The perfervid Romanticists of France in 1830 devoted themselves to disestablishing the outworn conventions of the Classicist drama. They accomplished their purpose; but all unwittingly they were merely substituting the conventions of their own Romanticist theater, which the later Naturalists denounced as quite as invalid as those which the Romanticists had discarded and destroyed. Already are we beginning to perceive that the Naturalists had perforce to employ their own conventions which seem to us now as unacceptable as those of the Classicists and of the Romanticists.

It is recorded that in the fiercest moment of the fight of the Romanticists against the Classicists, a play by the elder Dumas was triumphantly successful at the Odéon; and in the exuberance of their delight a group of the more ardent spirits joined hands and danced around the bust of Racine in the lobby of the theater, crying, "It's all up with you, Racine!"—*Enfoncé, Racine!* And for the moment at least they seemed to be justified in their joy. But within a score of years the genius of Rachel illuminated the masterpieces of both Racine and Corneille; and they were as triumphantly successful in their turn as the play of Dumas had been at its first performance. Moreover when Racine again came into his own the play of Dumas was already forgotten. Perhaps there is a lesson here for the sanguine iconoclasts of to-day. It may be that some of the reputations they are now annihilating will reveal themselves as solidly rooted as that of Racine.

## II

The conflict between youth and age, between conservatism and radicalism, is unending, because it is eternally necessary to the vitality of the several arts, which need to be reinvigorated generation after generation. Youth will always lack deference for age. Inexperience will always try to throw off the shackles whereby experience seeks to restrain its effervescence. In fact, the conflict between youth and age is only an ever recurring skirmish in the everlasting battle between the individual and society as a whole. Ever since man came down from his tree in the forest primeval, ever since he emerged from the cave which was his home and his castle, he has had to curb his own desires for the benefit of the community of which he has become a part. His family, his clan, his tribe, his city, his state, his nation call upon him continually for self-restraint, for the control of his passions, for self-sacrifice in view of a larger good. He must perforce part with his right to do absolutely as he pleases,—or there would be immediate anarchy. But he must not yield all of it or too much of it,—or there would be despotism, either autocratic or aristocratic.

It is upon the social bond that the solidity of civilization depends, and also the freedom of the individual by which alone is civilization advanced. The social bond must be neither unduly tightened nor unduly relaxed. Torquemada was the type which is likely to be evolved when the social organization assumes to itself a total control of the individual; and Cain was an early example of the type which rejects all restraint and asserts a man's right to live as he himself may will, regardless of the rights and of the lives of others. The consequences of excessive individualism were revealed in the outrages of the closing days of the Paris Commune; and the consequences of the excessive subordination of the subject to the state were displayed when Germans who may have been faithful husbands and devoted parents sent to destruction the wives and children on the *Lusitania*.

These are extreme manifestations of the two hostile principles which govern and always have governed and must always govern man, deciding what manner of life he shall lead and what kind of creature he shall be. Both principles are necessary; both must be kept active; and neither must be allowed to master the other. It is as true to-day as it was when Horace made the assertion, that safety lies in the middle of the road. The path to progress can be kept clear only when the opposing forces are in a state of unstable equilibrium, now swerved to one side by the onset of youth and now swung to the other by the sturdy resistance of age.

So it is that when the youngsters are vehemently asserting their own individual freedom and when the oldsters are insisting on the sacredness of the social bond, both sets of opponents are all unconsciously performing a useful function. So long as there results a drawn battle, all is well; and we can face the future with perennial confidence.

But at the present moment, and perhaps more especially in our own country, there are signs of danger. The pendulum is not at rest, and it seems to be swinging a little too far toward overt individualism. If this is the fact then it is the imme-

diate duty of the elders to point out the peril and to rally to the support of law and order. Possibly, indeed very probably, what we perceive may be only a temporary symptom, due to the excessive exuberance of youthful energy. The menace may pass away unfulfilled, as it has so often in the earlier centuries. The oncoming generation may awaken in time to a full recognition of the truth contained in George Eliot's assertion that "the right to rebellion is the right to seek a higher rule and not to wander in lawlessness." Yet indisputably there is to-day much that is disquieting. There is not a little evidence of a tendency on the part of the young to refuse allegiance to the social bond, to reject the heritage of the past, to renounce tradition, and to insist upon the insubordinate manifestation of the caprices and vagaries of the untamed and undisciplined individual. We can only trust that the evidence is not as significant as it seems; for that way madness lies.

Yet in life, in literature, in all the arts we cannot fail to perceive an unwonted restlessness, an unprecedented distaste for balance and harmony and proportion, accompanied by a desire to be different, by a seeking for novelty for its own sake, by a relish for eccentricity and freakishness, by a refusal to profit by what has been bequeathed to us by the past. In this new century we have been called upon to admire painting by men who have never learned how to paint, dancing by women who have never learned how to dance, verse by persons of both sexes who have never acquired the elements of versification. The tocsin of revolt resounds in ethics as wantonly as in æsthetics. In our recent poetry, in our recent fiction, in our recent drama there is an exaltation of the lawless and the illegal, the illicit and the illegitimate. The red flag has been unfurled over the heads of a mob of fiery youths, who are insistent in proclaiming their rights and who seem to be careless about fulfilling their duties. A host of young fellows are pushing forward, with their attention fixed only on themselves, selfish, egotistic and boastful. Apparently they are possessed by the belief that they can make a clean sweep of the past and that they can reach to the sky and touch the stars without standing on the shoulders of their predecessors and without profiting by the achievements of these predecessors.

## III

Probably this restless movement will soon spend its force as those who are directing it grow older and wiser. Probably the most it can achieve will be only the destruction of inheritances no longer valuable. Yet it may be as well for us to remind ourselves that there has never been any solid advance in any of the arts by any generation except when that generation began where the immediately preceding generation left off. The future must build upon the past. Nothing is more hopelessly futile than the attempt to make a clean sweep and to start fresh. To believe that this can ever be done is to ignore or to be ignorant of history. Progress can be made, not by disregarding what has already been discovered and invented but only by knowing all these things, by absorbing them, by assimilating them, by combining them, if need be and by adding discoveries and new inventions.

There is a phrase in constant use among the

electrical engineers which is pertinent and illuminating. They are in the habit of speaking of "the present state of the art," asserting that certain improvements greatly to be wished for are not possible in the present state of the art. And it is with the present state of the art as a starting-point that they prepare for the desired advance. In other words, before attempting to go forward, they make sure that they have mastered the technic of their profession, and that they know all that has been done and know how it has been done, so that they can prepare themselves to do something which has never been done.

Not a few of those who are in the forefront of the modern movement are apparently full of contempt for the present state of the special art they propose to practise. They affect to despise technic, although every great artist has always delighted in technical accomplishment. We find in the work of many of these professed innovators an amazing slovenliness of craftsmanship, an appalling disdain for artistry for its own sake. If they were more familiar with the work of the men who have led the artistic revolutions of the past, they would know that these leaders always began by being abreast of the state of the art and by equipping themselves with all the varied and delicate tools devised by the craftsmen who had gone before.

Victor Hugo, for example, revolutionized French poetry. He was profoundly dissatisfied with the restrictions then imposed upon the lyric and the drama by the rigidity of the accepted rules. But he was successful in his onslaught on an enfeebled tradition and on a false convention only because he was a supreme master of technic, dextrous beyond all the men of his time, possessed of all the secrets of the art of verse. Ibsen, again, was a most potent force; he was responsible for a revival of intellectual interest in the drama; and he too was the most adroit of technicians, the most consummate of craftsmen, finding his profit in the work of the ingenious French playwrights of the middle of the nineteenth century. No doubt, he bettered what he had learned from these Frenchmen, but he had to learn it, first of all; he had to acquaint himself with the state of the art as it was when he began to compose his series of social dramas. So closely does he follow in the footsteps of the French that the "League of Youth" and the "Pillars of Society" and even the first two acts of "A Doll's House" might have been written by a Scandinavian Sardou.

To many Americans, especially to the untraveled, the Russian ballet brought a new revelation of beauty. It was hailed as an absolute novelty, whereas in fact it represented only the latest stage of a long development of the pantomimic dance, first elaborated by Noverre in Paris in the early eighteenth century and in the next hundred years carried from Paris to Milan and Naples, to Vienna and finally to Petrograd. The dancing of Pavlova and of Mordkin was freshly individual; but only by that individuality did it differ from the dancing of Vestris and Taglioni. The mood might be Russian, but the method was Franco-Italian. One of the graceless pretenders who posture to symphonies and interpret poems by gesture alone once curtly dismissed Pavlova's exquisite grace as "toe-dancing." This was a characteristic exhibition of egotistic ignorance. The gracile Russian can dance on her

toes, of course, because the ability to do that is an essential part of the necessary technic. But not because she can dance on her toes is it that Pavlova is a haunting vision of floating etheriality.

In music, that most modern of the moderns Debussy made himself intimate with all the intricacies of harmony, before he ventured upon his own disquieting innovations. In sculpture, that most modern of the moderns Rodin proved himself in his early bust of Puvis de Chavannes to be capable of a delicate refinement of modeling recalling that of the masters of the Italian Renaissance; and his later works, which may appear to the careless observer as uncouthly hewn, disclose to the careful expert "the unconscious skill of the modeling hand"—to use George Eliot's apt phrase. And finally, in stage-decoration, that most modern of the moderns Joseph Urban had long years of practice as an architect in making himself familiar with all the principles of that art and so prepared himself arduously for the task that he was later to undertake.

#### IV

Before they were ready to risk themselves in the quest for novelty for a purely personal expression, Hugo and Ibsen, Debussy, Rodin and Urban made sure that they were abreast of the state of the art. They had subjected themselves to discipline and submitted to training. Only because they did this in their youth were they able in their maturity to express themselves adequately and interestingly and to advance the state of the art. And this discipline and this training is just what a crowd of clever youngsters now affect to despise—possibly from sheer laziness but more probably from a sincere conviction that these things are no longer necessary and indeed no longer useful. They seem to believe honestly that the future masterpieces of literature and of art are to be evolved out of the inner consciousness by some sort of spontaneous generation. They have persuaded themselves that art is as easy as it looks and that a mastery of its processes is the gift of God, freely granted to those who are conscious of possessing the artistic temperament.

In fact, this belief is not infrequently expressed with unsuspected frankness. One of the most distinguished of American mural painters was recently advising an ambitious young fellow from the West, who listened to the counsel courteously and rejected it absolutely. "No" he said "the School of Rome is not for me, and these art schools of New York are not for me. I have ideas of my own; I consider my temperament my most valuable asset—and I'm not going to submit to its being interfered with by any rules!"

Is this attitude the result of impatience or of laziness or of exorbitant conceit? One acute observer of contemporary conditions has suggested that it is due to the leveling tendency of modern life "so that men strive frantically to raise themselves above the level by doing something strange, startling, exaggerated, whimsical. To study the laws and methods of literature or the arts, to saturate themselves with traditions bores them, so they resort to sensationalism, and try to palm it off for originality. . . . Of course, any of them could achieve a similar originality by coming naked up Fifth Avenue." Indeed there are recent poems and recent pictures which are instantly recognizable

as indecent exposures of the nudity of their producers' minds, with never a fig-leaf of culture.

It is not difficult to diagnose this green-sickness of the arts, but it is hard to prescribe any medicine. The tendency to anarchy, to uneducated individualism, may be evident in all arts and in all countries; but none the less is it certain to subside, because if it persisted too long the several arts would cease to be—and that is inconceivable, since man needs them all and has developed them in response to his needs. The malady must run its course; and in spite of the expectant treatment of the mature practitioners, the young patients will come out of the attack temporarily enfeebled. Perhaps the fever will soon be shaken off by the stronger and the sober, better able to resist the infection.

When Richard Wagner, who was once denounced as a dangerous innovator, was a youthful student, he did not like the drudgery of counterpoint. But his instructor Theodore Weinlig made him work hard at it for six months, dismissing him then with the remark "What you have learned is freedom!" And it was this laboriously acquired liberty within the law which enabled Wagner in the prelude to the "Master Singers" to work simultaneously in counterpoint five of his leading motives.

Once again is it helpful to quote from Mr. Dobson's translation of Gautier's "Ars Victrix":

Yes; when the ways oppose—  
When the hard means rebel,  
Fairer the work outgrows—  
More potent for the spell.

O Poet, then, forbear  
The loosely sandalled verse,  
Choose rather thou to wear  
The buskin—strait and terse;

Leave to the tyro's hand  
The limp and shapeless style;  
See that thy form demand  
The labor of the file.

Sooner or later the tocsin of revolt will cease its clangor. Sooner or later the young men of promise will furl the red flag. They will refuse fellowship with the fakers. They will tire of facile eccentricity and of lazy freakishness, of unprofitable sensationalism and of undisciplined individualism. They will again seek the aid of tradition and they will master the secrets of technic. Then and then only will they discover the stern and abiding joy of difficulty resolutely grappled with and ultimately conquered.

*Brander Matthews*



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